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The Baron C. C. O'Keeffe: The Legend and the Legacy
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The Baron C.C. O'Keeffe:

by EDITH TOOLE OBERLEY

A tattered letter, dated simply "Sept. 2" from "Belmonte," (Ireland), bears this closing: Long life and many a happy Xmas to Mr. and Mrs. O'Keeffe. May the "BARON" *live temperately, make money and Save his Soul* whatever may betide him. *May God Bless you all.*

Yrs very sincerely,

Mary Burns

This missive traced a tortuous route across the Atlantic, over American plains and mountains, and finally reached its destination a month later in a crude cabin settled in among the hills a dozen miles west of present day Missoula, Montana. Its arrival was no doubt a big event, certainly in the life of Anna O'Keeffe, the "Baron's" wife. A person of sensitive and poetic temperament, she saved carefully every reminder of a more civilized existence. This letter was one of several found within the pages of a worn scrapbook, filled with pressed flowers, bits of lace, cards, and original verse, which attests to her awareness of another world. Life with the "Baron" could not have been easy, although surely it was as exciting, unpredictable and full as ever a life could be.

Who was this "Baron," so exhorted to "live temperately, make money, and save his soul"? Mary Burns must have known him well, either personally or through correspondence with his wife, because her admonitions were directed toward certain key aspects of his character. In some ways, he was the prototype of the Irish character; indeed, he cultivated the image. Short and strongly built, red-haired, fiery-faced, and green-eyed, he was feisty, capricious, ingenious, crude, voluble, and possessed of an iron will. His temper, always simmering, frequently flared out in spectacular explosions, as we shall see. He also had the power, when he wished to exercise it, of being exceedingly cosmopolitan and charming, a quality instrumental in winning his lovely English wife, Anna Lester. He could astound his listeners with rich Irish oratory or arouse them to instant fury by firing off original insults which always pierced vulnerable spots. He was a rugged individualist who, by sheer force of personality, will, and determination, carved out a prosperous living for himself and his family, wielded some influence in the politics of Montana, and lived a life so colorful that no written account could do it justice.

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the Legend and the Legacy

CORNELIUS C. O'KEEFFE

family photos used herein furnished by Mr. and Mrs. John Toole, Missoula

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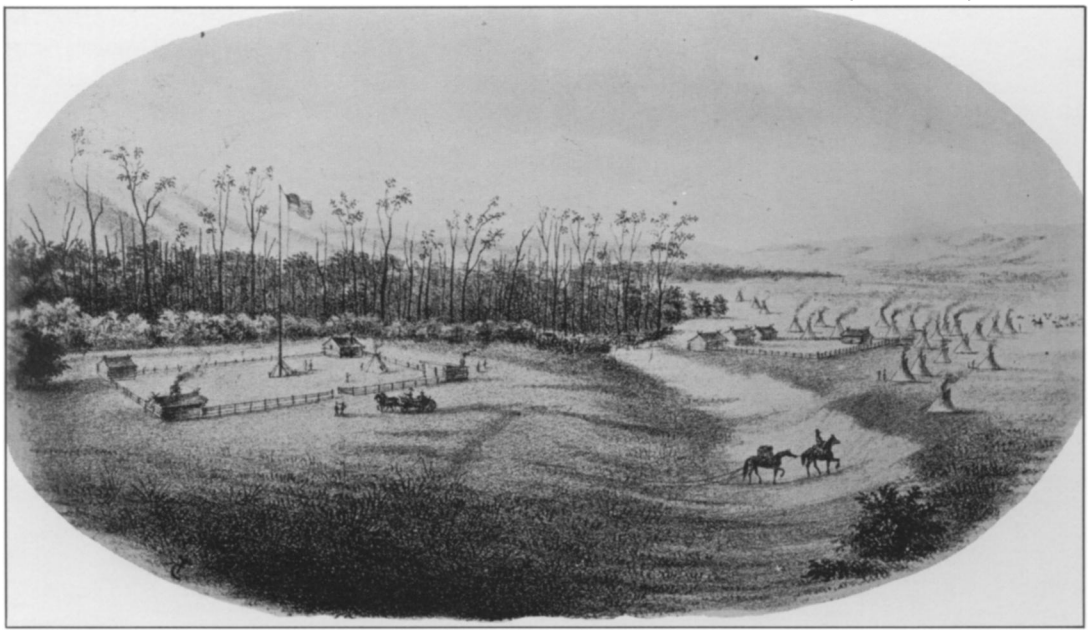

CANTONMENT STEVENS — CAPT. MULLAN'S WINTER QUARTERS, 1853-4

Whence came this inimitable Irishman and why to the wilds of Montana, in 1860 a territory scarcely settled and full of all the dangers a frontier life held? The story has its beginnings in County Cork, Ireland, a land of mists, stone walls, green fields, and the abject poverty of the peasants in the midst of the potato famine of 1845-46. Cornelius C. O'Keeffe was a young political activist, a member of the revolutionary "Young Irelanders." He and his group agitated against the oppressive English government, which, they said, through callous neglect and abuse, was exacerbating the potato famine. O'Keeffe was caught by the authorities and sentenced to exile in Van Dieman's Land, now Tasmania, a convenient Nineteenth Century dumping ground for political prisoners. By his daughter's account, he escaped from the prison ship in New York in 1853. Finding passage on a ship which took him around Cape Horn, he settled for a brief period in California.

Moving on to Washington state, he spent a few unsatisfactory years farming, and in 1859 joined the crew of John Mullan, who headed a party commissioned by the U.S. Army to build a wagon road between the headwaters of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers. After a miserable winter spent in camp near present-day St. Regis, near Montana's western border, the Mullan crew made its way into Hellgate, now Missoula.

Here is where the story of the "Baron" Cornelius C. O'Keeffe as his descendants know it really begins. As the Mullan party passed through the area northwest of Hellgate, O'Keeffe's attention was attracted by a green, fertile-looking plain, spreading gently into foothills which, in turn, swelled into mountains. To the south of this valley marched the Bitterroot Mountains, tumbling together in craggy masses of blue, green and purple that diminished in the hazy distance. Directly to the northeast loomed Mount Stewart, flanked by the hills and ridges of the Rattlesnake Mountains. Bubbling into this springtime valley from the mountains of the north was a small, pure, rushing stream pouring itself through a narrow defile. This precipitous canyon was known as the Coriakan Defile, named after a trapper who, in the 1840's, was ambushed and killed by Blackfeet Indians.

Montana in the spring is beautiful. The wildflowers, the sweet-smelling air, the rippling streams, the inviting expanse of open, untouched land . . . O'Keeffe's decision to homestead in this area influenced the lives of the many people he came to know, as well as his descendants, who feel a bond with the land unusual in these days of a more rootless society. A vivid description of the spot he chose to settle is provided by his daughter, Mary (Mollie) O'Keeffe Ross. She said in her reminiscences, written many years later:

> *It never takes a very great stretch of the imagination for me to see Montana, and our locality particularly, as it must have appeared fifty years ago . . . When I drive along the roads or ride over the hills in our beautiful Indian Summer days, I can see it all as it used to look. No white man's habitation in sight, the tall waving bunch grass with buffalo, not cattle, grazing on a thousand*

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hills, the beautiful colored foliage, then as now, and deer and antelope and all wild animals in plenty . . . the country was full of living things. I can see the Indian lodges clustered along some stream, the Rattlesnake or Grant Creek. How big and broad and grand it must have been, but how terribly lonesome . . .

Mollie went on to describe the privations her father endured in those early years; the lack of proper shelter or food, and above all, the deep, abiding loneliness. One winter he had nothing to eat but beans and flour. He warmed the beans with tallow candles he had bought at $1.00 a pound from Mrs. Grant, Mrs. Captain Higgins' mother. At one point, to assuage loneliness, he traded two blankets for a tiny kitten. One day, when he was leaving for a short trip, the kitten tried to follow him. In attempting to send it back to the yard, he threw a stone which hit the kitten and killed it. Overcome, he sat down and wept. Mollie related that "he always cried at that story."

In spite of these hardships, O'Keeffe built a log cabin with a sod roof and settled to the business of raising grain, potatoes, and fruit. His brother, Dave, joined him in 1861, and the brothers became successful at their ventures. Soon they were sending supplies as far as Fort Benton, M.T., Corrine, Utah, and the Montana gold towns of Bannack and Virginia City. The O'Keeffes are said to have brought in the first modern implements of farming to western Montana: threshing machine, reaper, and mower.

So far, this tale of C. C. O'Keeffe in Montana is no different from the ordinary pioneer story which describes determined men wresting a living from the soil. It is not long after his settling at the O'Keeffe Ranch, however, that the tales of the Baron's unusual exploits begin.

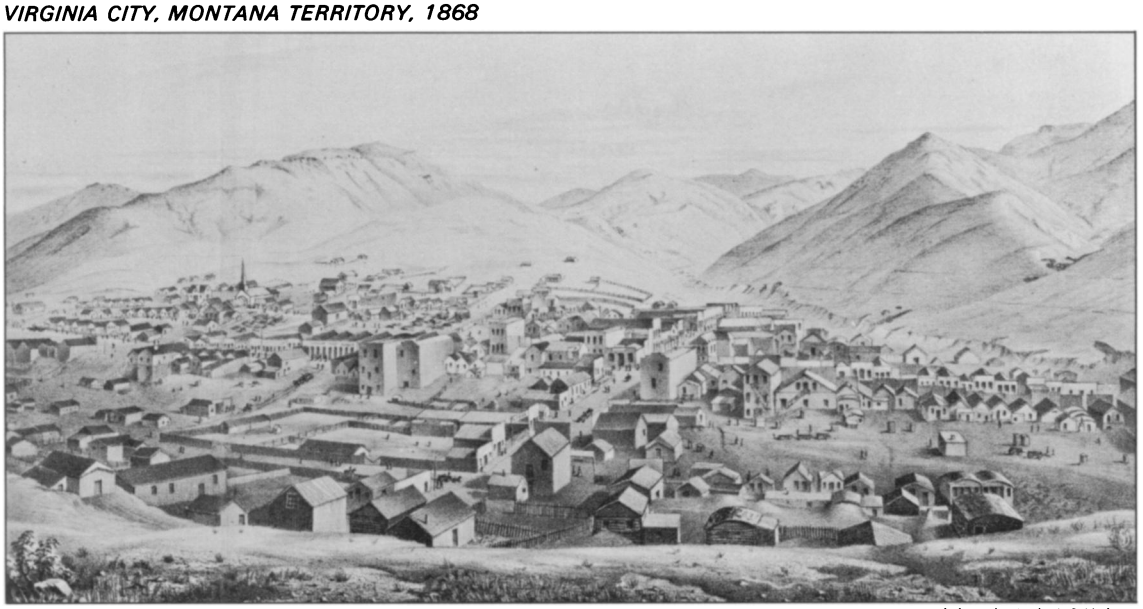
To clarify one point: why would an Irish peasant who lived in a sod hut be known to contemporaries and posterity as "the Baron"? It is typical of O'Keeffe's sense of humor and of personal grandeur that he would let it be known that he was a land baron, a member of the Irish nobility.

It was in this guise that he rode to Virginia City with a load of potatoes to sell one September day in 1865. There he was struck with the charms of Anna Lester, an English girl who had also lived in Ireland and was teaching school in Virginia City. Legend has it that O'Keeffe, dashing and gallant with his handlebar mustache ablaze and his green eyes ardent, pressed his suit with great vigor, leaning heavily on his well-known sobriquet of "Baron."

He promised Anna, who had just recently arrived across the plains in a covered wagon, a life of ease and plenty in the baronial palace back at the Coriakan Defile. His efforts in this whirlwind courtship met with success. They were married within three days. Imagine Anna's dismay when she saw the real "baronial palace"!

Anna Lester's own trip westward makes an interesting story. According to Mollie, old tales were told by her parents around the fire at the O'Keeffe Ranch . . .

VIRGINIA CITY, MONTANA TERRITORY, 1868



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One of my pleasantest recollections is of an immense fireplace built in the corner of our big kitchen. It was made of adobe; they had no bricks then. We children would sit or lie on a buffalo robe spread before it and listen, winter evenings, to reminiscences. Many old-timers sat beside that fire — traders from the Hudson Bay Company, miners, packers and later cowboys. Their stories if in print would entertain as well as some of Jack London's. They did not seem at all out of the ordinary to us children there; we were still in the wilderness.

Mollie related how her mother came from Council Bluffs to Virginia City in 1865 after a three-month trip by ox train: "It was a long, monotonous journey, and not without a good deal of fear." Although they did not encounter hostile Indians, stories they heard caused them to take the precaution of forming the covered wagons into a protective circle every night. Mollie wrote:

At last in September, they arrived in Virginia City. What a haven it was! They treated themselves to dinner at a restaurant that day. The building had a roof of ox hides. It was raining, and as they ate the maggots would drop from the ceiling out of the skins, which had not been well tanned. Everything was a fabulous price, calico a dollar a yard, etc., but they were very glad to be there. Before long my mother married my father and went to live in a little log cabin on a big lonely ranch far away from anyone, never a woman near.

Anna Lester O'Keeffe's scrapbook, as mentioned before, suggests much about her character and temperament. Carefully assembled, it is inscribed "Mary Aileen O'Keeffe from Her Mother, Nov. 26, 1882." It was clearly important to her that her daughters grow up with some grace and awareness of a more cultured world, raised though they were in a log cabin with buffalo robes for carpeting. There are several pictures of such contemporary figures as Queen Victoria and the Czar of Russia, people who ruled nations and lived in a genteel society foreign to two little pioneer girls. There are many clippings of poems and articles written in the slightly sentimental Victorian mode, valentines, faded photographs: a loving collection of the rare and tiny treasures with which Anna Lester could instill in her daughters the ideal of "gentle womanhood."

She very much appreciated the splendor of her wilderness surroundings, though, as her own poetry, three stanzas of which follow, shows:

Amidst the dark blue Mountains
Of my Montana home
I love its sunny fountains
As through its woods I roam

When wandering o'er its dark green hills
I sometimes wend my way
I love to hear the murmuring rills
Make music day by day

And oftentimes entranced I gaze
Upon the setting sun
Upon its gorgeous tinted rays
When its day's work is done.

The scrapbook as a whole shows a conflict between Anna's love for the purity of the wilderness in which she lived and her longing for a more civilized, ordered beauty. The challenges she faced as a pioneer wife were very difficult but often exhilarating. Her character was a good complement to the Baron's. She made him a fine wife, as well as an excellent mother to their two daughters, Mary (Mollie) and Margaret.

The Baron's courting experiences were not limited solely to his pursuit of Anna Lester, however. One very funny story was made public after his death, in a reminiscence by W. H. Babcock which appeared in the March 25, 1893 issue of the *Bozeman Avant Courier*. It seems that the Baron was, at an earlier time, quite interested in a captivating young half-Indian girl whose father, a white man, cast a jaundiced eye upon her multitude of suitors. He was so hostile, in fact, that he "was accused of having poisoned some of these men, not so they died but so that they were very sick. As a consequence, most persons admired the girl at a distance."

The Baron, intrigued by the "dusky damsel's" beauty and her inaccessibility, sought out a lawyer to intercede on his behalf with the father. The lawyer, named Meredith, returned with glowing tales of the father's pleasure at the suit, claiming that both father and daughter were "eager for the match. In fact he overdid matters by picturing how glad they would be and how easy it was [for O'Keeffe] to win her."

A little nonplussed at such instant availability, the Baron "sat in a brown study for perhaps 20 minutes. When he spoke it was substantially as follows: 'Now Meredith, I don't know whether I want that blamed half-breed or not. Me father was a baron before me and what would me family think to hear I was married to a half-breed. A man of me means and dignity. I have $10,000 in cash, etc.' "

Although C. C. O'Keeffe did not marry an Indian, many of them became his friends. Except for a couple of rather humorous altercations, he managed to coexist quite peacefully with the native Americans throughout his lifetime. According to Mollie O'Keeffe, "the Indians were very kind to Father . . . when he first came into the Missoula valley. One helped build the little cabin with its dirt roof and also helped split the rails to fence around it. But the Indians would often all go on their hunting trips and he would be all alone . . . I remember the whole flat at the mouth of the canyon being covered with their lodges and once seeing a grand bear hunt. They drove the bear out of the mountains and killed it on the sidehill just in front of our house. There were fully a hundred Indians chasing him with their dogs."

Close to the O'Keeffe house was an old battleground on which the Blackfeet and Flatheads used to fight in earlier times. Mollie remembered one dark,

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rainy night when seemingly a hundred Flathead Indians arrived at the door and asked for protection inside the house, fearing attack by hostile Blackfeet. They all crowded inside and stayed until dawn. Mollie recalled being "awfully frightened, but Mother seemed quite calm." Although the girls were frequently alarmed by drunken Indians singing and yelling in the road at night ("a hair-raising, blood-curdling sensation"), the family was never harmed.

The Baron alone, however, had a couple of skirmishes which bear retelling. One day a drunken Indian appeared at the back door of the O'Keeffe ranch, looking for food. When no one seemed to be around, he pushed through the door and wandered into the main room, where the Baron (now an older man) was napping peacefully on the sofa. Startled into sudden wakefulness by the boozy smell of an alien presence, the Baron angrily demanded "wat in hell" the Indian was doing there. Sharp words ensued, and the Indian's belligerence became too much for O'Keeffe's patience. So he whacked the intruder over the head with his rifle butt, and as the Indian slunk away, he prepared to return to the bliss of his nap. A wisp of smoke wafting through the window jarred his senses again. He leaped up to discover that the Indian, in retaliation, had set fire to all his haystacks!

Another tale that is told and retold with delight is the story of the Baron and his cravat. His granddaughter, the late Marjorie Ross Toole, wrote that this event occurred in 1862, when the O'Keeffe brothers were taking a load of potatoes to Bannack by way of Trail Creek through the Bitterroot Mountains. A very humorous and fanciful account of the incident describes how inauspicious the trip was from the beginning. Dave was drunk when they started out, and spent the day weaving all over the trail and mumbling to himself. They were accompanied by a Mexican cook who irritated the Baron intensely by wearing constantly an insolent, lazy grin and refusing to do any extra work. Two days passed with no harm done except to the combined dispositions of the party. But on the second night the three found themselves surrounded by a war party of Bannock Indians who had been attracted by the fire carelessly built up by the cook.

The Indians surveyed the scene with pleased grins, then proceeded to unload the thirteen horses and cook the potatoes in the fire. After the feast, they relieved the O'Keeffe party of the rest of their burden by transferring all but one of the thirteen horses to the hands of their own braves. Then they seriously undermined the personal dignity of the brothers by snipping off buttons and removing gaiters. Naturally, the Baron was incensed at all this folly, but he managed to suppress his temper until one of the braves cast a covetous eye upon his cravat, an article of clothing he felt honorbound to keep. When asked to give it up, he refused and snorted, crimson-faced, "An wat's more, ya big ham, you an' your schoolboys had better trot along, or it's lickin' ye all I'll be."

His Irish fervor so intimidated the Indian that he backed down, unwilling to lose face but reluctant to tangle with such tangible fury. Finally, however, to bribe the Indians into leaving, the Baron surrendered the cravat and the three escaped unscathed. Although they were shorn of horses, goods, and clothing, the indomitable O'Keeffes found their way back to the ranch and set out again with a new load of potatoes for Bannack.

Another episode which shows the Baron's feisty spirit is the story of the O'Keeffes' hospitality to the road agent. According to Marjorie Ross Toole, in January of 1864, Bob Zachary, a member of the Henry Plummer gang, came to the O'Keeffe ranch and asked for food and shelter. The O'Keeffes, happy to see a new person whether his reasons for travelling be fair or foul, showed the stranger much hospitality. The morning after Zachary's arrival, the Baron was aroused by an imperious knocking on his front door. There were the Vigilantes, armed and only too anxious to escort this notorious road agent to his final resting place. Without a glance at the owners of the house, they strode dramatically into the room and said, "Come, boy," to Zachary who was lying huddled on the floor in his blankets. The villain of the scene prepared to depart docilely enough, but the Baron was irritated at having his hospitality so rudely interrupted and his guest so summarily dragged forth. His ire was really aroused, however, when he glanced out of the front window and saw the Vigilantes preparing to hang the man on his front gatepost.

Slamming open the window, he bellowed, "Here! Wat's goin' on! There'll be nobody hangin' from me gatepost, and furthermore, ye can't hang a man on an empty stomach! Ye'll be bringin' him back in here this minnit if I have anything to say, an' thin afther breakfast ye'll take him into town an' do the thing proper!"

There was much arguing back and forth before the Vigilantes complied, but Bob Zachary had a hearty meal before he was taken into town and "hung proper."

Lest this portrait of the Baron O'Keeffe paint him only in colors of fierceness and pugnacity, another Virginia City incident should show other facets of his character: his sense of honor and personal pride. The *Reminiscenses of Matilda Sevieur* recall how, in 1864, during one of the Baron's trips to Virginia City, he incurred a wound in his leg. A lady who noticed him limping gave him linen, castile soap, and salve to cleanse and bind the wound. They talked for a long time about County Cork. On his next trip, he rumbled into town with his wagon and waved away the miners who had converged and were grabbing at the green vegetables

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so rarely seen in those parts. "Hold on, boys," he said. "Let me select some of these vegetables that I want to send to a lady up the gulch who saved me leg."

O'Keeffe shared this sense of personal honor with his close friend, Thomas Francis Meagher, who was a famous Civil War general and twice Acting Governor of Montana. His acquaintance with Meagher went back a long way; both were sent away from their homeland on the same ship because of their activities with the "Young Irelanders." We gain a glimpse into Meagher's private feelings and concerns in a letter he wrote to the Baron on September 26, 1866, in which he requested a loan of $1,000 to pay back some "miserable little bills:"

> *Having, as I said to you, secured the "public" triumph, I want to complete it by the "private" . . . I want to return to Virginia City a proud and independent Irish gentleman — having no one to insult, or even to give me the cold shoulder, because I owe him a miserable little bill of "50" or "100" dollars —*
>
> *I want my countrymen to place me up and beyond the sneers of these "blackguards" — who are, ever, so ready to run down an Irishman, whenever, and wherever they have a chance —*
>
> *It is my ambition — it is indeed, and in truth my heart's desire — to be the representative and champion of the Irish Race in the wild great mountains . . .*

This florid, expansive prose reflects both men's desire for public stature as well as personal honor. Surely the Baron, too, was conscious of the "shanty Irish" image so prevalent in those times, and sought to change it. He assured the lady in Virginia City that his family back in Cork were "very respectable folks, ma'am." Such feelings (as well as his constant need to be in the limelight) may have prompted him to become politically active in the late 1860's and early 1870's.

One other letter to O'Keeffe from Meagher is faded, torn, and difficult to decipher, but it is evident that Meagher, on December 10, 1866, acted on a request by the Baron to secure the job of Missoula County Commissioner for him. "Immediately on receipt of your letter of the 6th November, I called upon the Governor and handed the communication to him. The result was he made out your commission as County Commissioner, and sent the same, right off, to the Council for Confirmation."

Thus, through the offices of a good friend, the Baron O'Keeffe's short but colorful political career was launched.

Although there is not much known about the Baron's work as Missoula County Commissioner, there is no doubt that he made waves. An article on Missoula government in 1866 by A. L. Stone which appeared in the *Great Falls Tribune* in September, 1944, describes how O'Keeffe refused to show up for two months at County Commissioners' meetings, irritated because the county government had been transferred from Hellgate to Missoula Mills, thus necessitating a longer trip to get to meetings. Then, when the other men present seemed to take very little interest in some minor issues he raised, he "bolted the session" just after becoming reconciled to the new meeting place.

The Baron seems to have met with greater satisfaction in his role as legislator. The January, 1952 issue of this magazine described how the Baron referred to the legislature as "parliament." "Until a few years ago there were those who could recall seeing the Irishman astride his horse, in formal dress, on his way to the legislature. He was wont to shout to passers-by 'Out of me way! I'm on me way to parliament'!"

O'Keeffe's sojourn in the legislative halls lasted only two years. He was elected to the territorial legislature for an extraordinary session in 1873, and returned in 1874. He was defeated when he ran in 1876. The specific reasons for his political downfall remain obscure, since the citizenry evidently appreciated greatly his introduction and support of certain popular bills.

Research into the House Journals of 1873 and 1874, though, is enlightening: the Baron's name is mentioned with some frequency, but it appears that our illustrious statesman is recorded most often as having moved for adjournment or recess of the various daily sessions.

Bills which would directly benefit the Baron and his constituents received his strong support; in 1873 he moved to repeal the dog tax law, and through some deft maneuvering managed to have Missoula County exempt from an act restricting "the killing of game and catching of fish." In 1874 he advocated a bill to "regulate the fees of doctors and lawyers."

His efforts were well received after the 1874 session. A quote from the *Helena Daily Herald* of March 12, 1874, describes how the Baron, returning to Missoula, received "a salute of ten guns . . . fired by the citizens of Missoula, who assembled in immense numbers, and a grand demonstration took place, which is said to have been the most enthusiastic within the recollection of the oldest inhabitant . . . as the Baron . . . stood proud and erect before the crowd, a happy, contented smile radiated his features . . ." Apparently Missoulians were pleased by the Baron's support of "the Toll Road and Bridge Law, the new Apportionment Law, and others." It is not known exactly what role the Baron played in the passage of these laws, but legend has it that the absence of state toll roads and bridges in Montana is attributable directly to C. C. O'Keeffe, since he opposed such inconveniences so vehemently. There is a story of how the Baron, who made frequent

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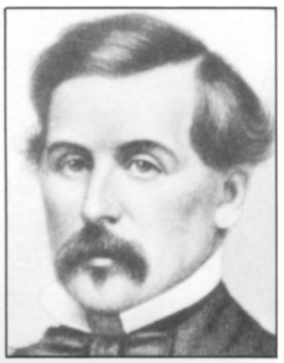
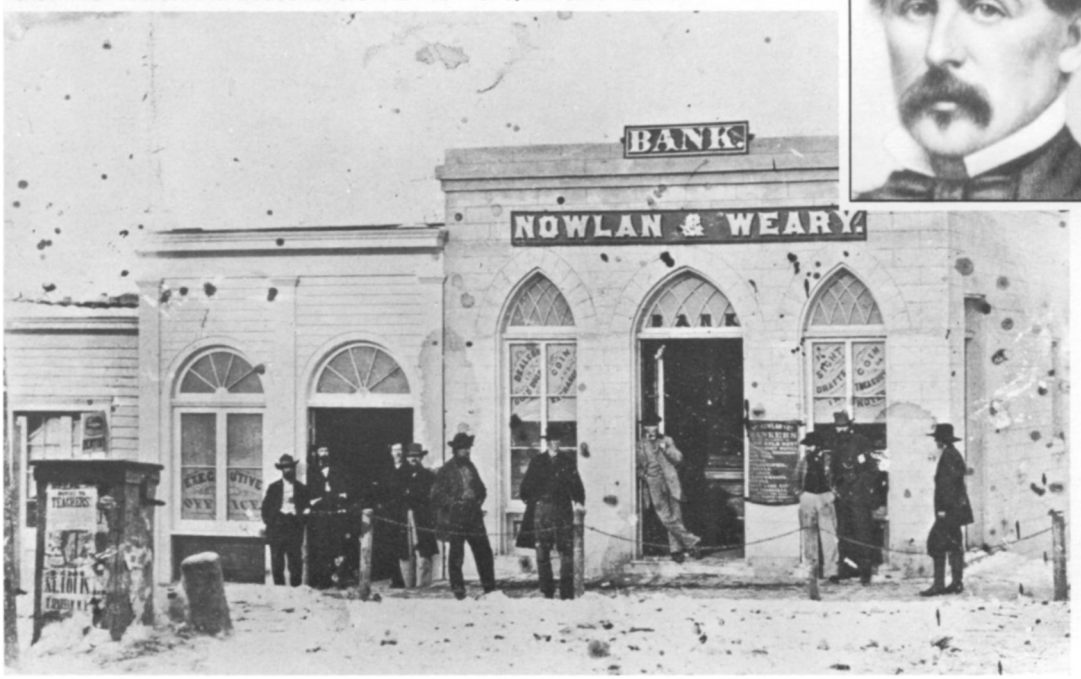


Montana Territorial executive offices were in the building at the left in this scene taken in Virginia City in 1866. Thomas Francis Meagher (inset) who came out to Montana as Territorial Secretary but who twice was Acting Governor, was a fellow Irish radical and traded favors with his friend, Baron O'Keeffe.



trips to Fort Owen, once refused out of principle to pay toll at a bridge across the Clark Fork, and instead swam the river.

The culmination of his political career, the "grand demonstration" in Missoula, took place in 1874, when the Baron was an established figure, a "solid citizen." Montana was a developing territory, fitted out with all the proprieties of a legislature and judiciary system.

But the most famous story about the Baron occurred a dozen years earlier, when Montana was raw and unsettled, the Vigilantes and road agents were rife, and legislatures and judicial systems were niceties thus far unheard of in those parts. This story has been documented by several sources, including the Baron's daughter, his brother, and his granddaughter, and it is of genuine historical significance. It describes the first trial in what is now the State of Montana.

The defendant was, naturally, the Baron O'Keeffe, and the plaintiff was one Tin Cup Joe, a half-breed French Canadian trapper who had come down into the valley from his trapping lines in the Bitterroot with his Indian wife and a half-starved horse. This was in the month of January or February, 1861 or 1862. They came to the O'Keeffe cabin and asked permission to stay all night. The Baron granted it on condition that Tin Cup Joe take care of the place while he and his brother went up the Blackfoot to see Captain Mullan. He cautioned his guest not to let the horse get into the seed oats which he was carefully saving to plant a crop in the spring.

All appeared in order upon the Baron's return, until he glanced in the direction of the barn and saw the horse contentedly munching on the oats he had stored. His Irish temper raging, he drove the horse from the barn, whereupon the frightened creature fell into a partially excavated root cellar and died before it could be gotten out.

Tin Cup Joe, highly incensed at having one source of his livelihood so dispensed with, went immediately to Hellgate to talk to his friend, Henry Brooks, who was Justice of the Peace. Brooks advised Joe to sue for the killing of his horse. So a trial was arranged which was scheduled to take place in Bolte's Saloon. According to Marjorie Ross Toole, "Bolte's was a little log building not far from the Higgins-Worden store — the first store to be built in the state. The windows were very small; there was just one door. And in the dark interior was the scene of the first formal administration of justice in Montana."

This trial was formal in name only. The court session opened with Brooks acting as judge and Frank Woody as self-appointed prosecuting attorney.

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FRANK H. WOODY

HENRY P. BROOKS

(According to Dave O'Keeffe, Woody acted as the judge. In Mrs. Toole's version, Woody was prosecutor while Brooks acted as judge. In both accounts, however, Woody was the person to whom the Baron presented his "credentials.") The Baron was there, prepared to conduct his own defense. As Granville Stuart observed in his *Journals* under the date of March 20, 1862, "Anyone knowing the Baron would feel confident that he was well able to look out for himself."

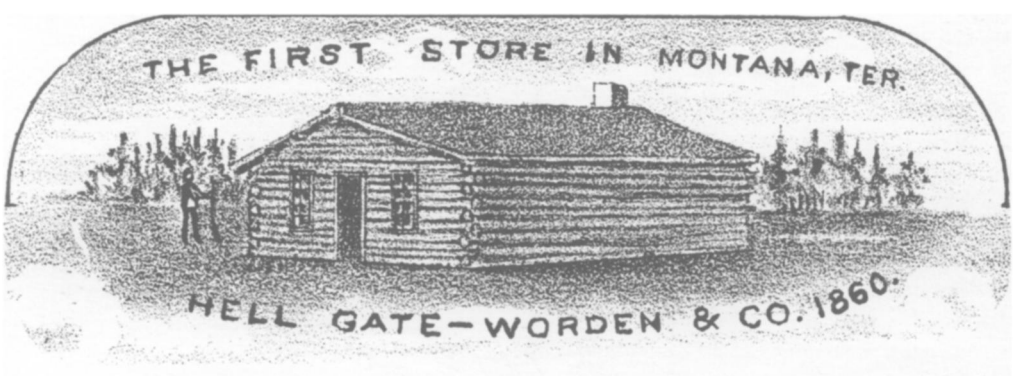
The proceedings began, with Tin Cup Joe's lawyer contending that the Baron had attacked the horse with a pitchfork. (The Baron has since been exonerated of this charge; its falsity rests primarily on the fact that there was no such implement in that part of the country at the time). O'Keeffe was becoming prickly with anger at hearing himself accused of such indignities. He sat there, growing more crimson every second, then suddenly stood up so fast his chair fell over with a crash. Stalking over to Woody, his eyes blazing and his red hair sticking up in tufts, he demanded to know who gave him the right to defend a case and where were his credentials? Woody reached coolly into his pocket and produced a pack of cards.

Fanning them out with a flourish, he smiled confidently at the Baron and responded, "Here are my credentials. And by what right, may I ask, do you find yourself duly constituted to act in your own defense? May I see your credentials?"

"You really want to see my credentials?"

When Woody replied in the affirmative, the Baron's fist shot forward, striking that distinguished attorney between the eyes. "Here are my credentials!" roared the infuriated defendant. Then the melee began. Another Frenchman struck the Baron over the head with a stool and although the redoubtable O'Keeffe was ready to fight every man in the place, he might have been in sad shape if a man named Skinner (according to Dave O'Keeffe, a road agent), hadn't happened along. He took the part of the underdog and the fight raged for some time. Finally the Baron, disgusted, left.

After his departure, some semblance of order was restored. Amid shattered glass and splintered chairs, it was decided that the Baron should pay $40.00 in damages to Tin Cup Joe. It is universally assumed that the settlement was never made, and that Tin Cup Joe still has the $40.00 coming!



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MARJORIE ROSS TOOLE

MOLLIE O'KEEFFE ROSS

ANNA LESTER O'KEEFFE

HOWARD K. TOOLE

KENNETH ROSS

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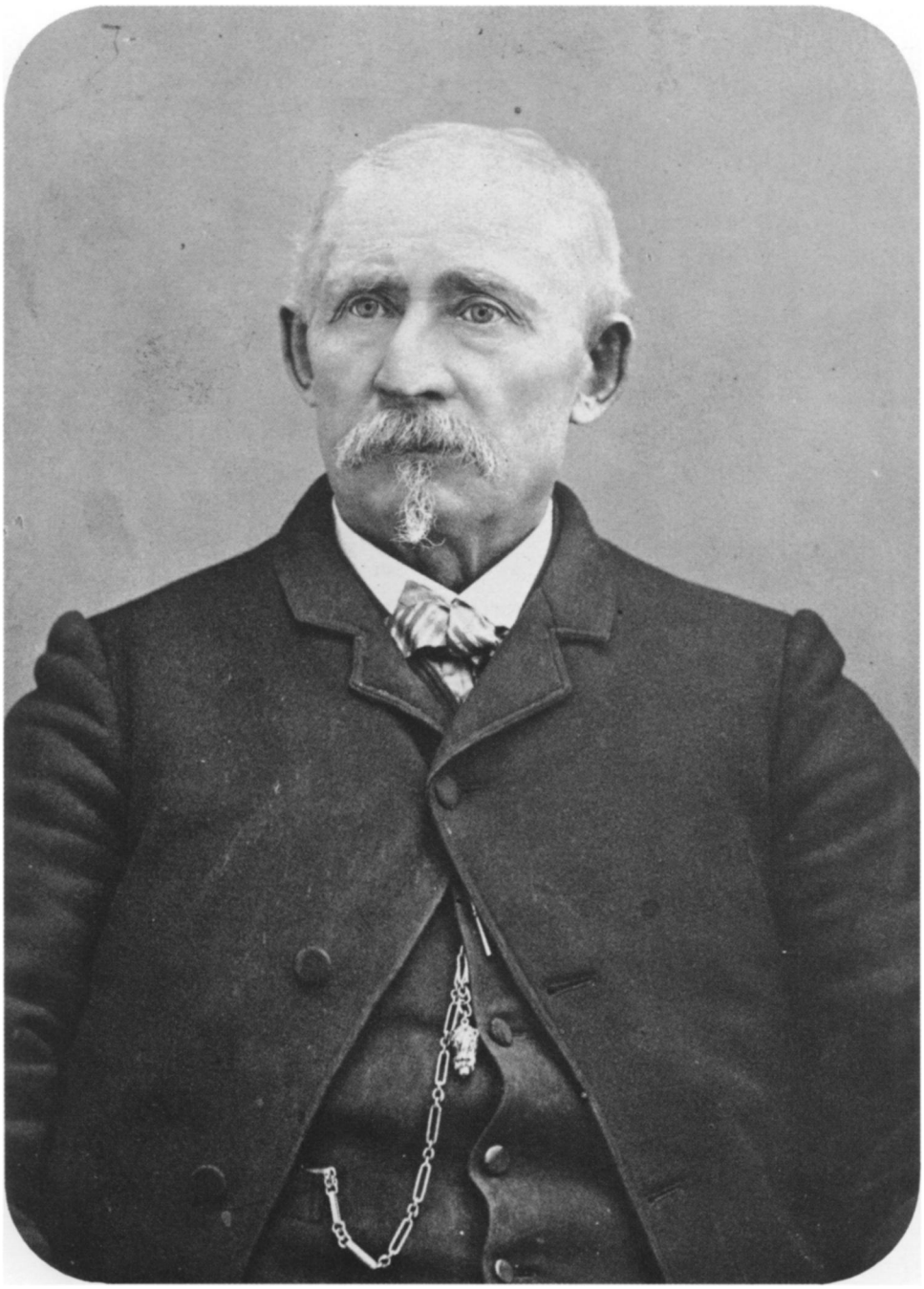

THE BARON O'KEEFFE

in his later years

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Typically, Baron O'Keeffe maintained his humor, courage, and strength up until the last minutes of his life. An article from the *Helena Daily Herald,* dated June 10, 1871 and signed JHM, characterized him at one point in his career: "The Baron is brave as steel, will fight in a minute, and I believe always gets 'licked,' but his courage is never the weaker for that."

Dean A. L. Stone, in a series of articles on Montana history in the *Great Falls Tribune,* described the Baron on the day of his death in 1883 in a story which deserves to be quoted here:

> *As the Baron passed into the last moments of his life he asked for the presence of his brother Dave, for the old man still had his consciousness and knew that death was imminent. But Dave had gone to Frenchtown and couldn't get back that day. When the Baron heard this he went into a rage against his brother. Mr. E. M. Ross, who knew that the Baron had Bright's disease and was paying him a neighborly call on that day, tells the story:*
>
> *"Upon the answer to his question as to the whereabouts of Dave, the Baron exploded, 'Gone to Frenchtown! What the hell does he have to go to Frenchtown on the day I'm going to die?'*
>
> *"The comment that followed upon the lack of fraternal feeling on the part of Dave is better not repeated here. It was fierce and vindictive and lasted a long time. When the sick man's breath gave out Ross ventured the natural assurance that it was nonsense to talk about death; there was no immediate prospect of it.*
>
> *" 'Of course I'm going to die today,' was the comeback. 'Look at my hands; they're turning purple right now.' Ross looked. The Baron was right. His fingers were blue. In a few hours he was dead."*

Claude Elder claims that Dave O'Keeffe, upon returning from Frenchtown, built a coffin for the Baron. They loaded the coffin into a wagon for transportation into Missoula, while Dave, presumably out of sentiment, got roaring drunk. He rode the coffin into Missoula, flourishing a pint of whiskey and singing Irish ballads all the way. It was certainly a more appropriate send-off for the Baron than a lugubrious funeral march.

Cornelius C. O'Keeffe was a man moulded by the rigors of his age, yet helped shape his world and make it what it was. I often wonder what he would be like had he lived today. Could his character have made such a strong imprint on our memories if he had lived within the last few decades? Would he have been as free to exercise his ingenuity, his courage, his eccentricity? As the redoubtable Montana lady, Jeannette Rankin, observed recently during a television interview, "People have to conform so much more today. In the old days we did what we pleased." The Baron certainly did what he pleased; and in doing so he made some significant contributions to the pioneer west, as well as creating some legends that are remembered today with laughter and delight.

A mournful conclusion bemoaning a lost spirit and glorifying the pioneer days would be as inappropriate, however, as a sedate funeral train would have been after the Baron's death. True, the O'Keeffe ranch stands in danger of being engulfed by pastel housing developments, but O'Keeffe Creek still gushes out of Coriakan Defile and the contours of the hills around Hellgate remain constant. We can still hike up to the Top O' Deep where the Baron's descendants struggled to find gold during the Depression, and find peace in the beargrass and the sunlight. This bond of the land's beauty is something that links Baron O'Keeffe with his most remote descendants, and we are grateful for the legacy.

THE BARON TO MATTHEW: SIX GENERATIONS

Cornelius C. O'Keeffe, whose colorful individuality on Montana's frontier is here recounted, would probably have approved the free, no-nonsense mode of travel employed by Matthew James Oberley, his great-great-great grandson. Matthew's mother, with whom he is pictured, is Edith Toole Oberley, who has gathered together for us a great many high points among fact and legend surrounding "The Baron" O'Keeffe. The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John Toole of Missoula, she recognizes assistance from them and many in her family, including her grandmother, the late Marjorie Ross Toole, her uncles, K. Ross and Bruce Toole, and the written words of her great grandmother, Mollie Ross, the daughter of the Baron, and his gentle wife, Anna. Aside from family reminiscences and records, Mrs. Oberley has made full use of other written archival records in reconstructing the story of her contentious, irreverent but always interesting forebear. A graduate of Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, from which she holds B.A. and M.A. degrees in English, she is married to Terry D. Oberley, who has just received his Ph.D. in Microbiology and is currently attending Northwestern Medical School. The Oberleys hope to return soon to the Northwest to live, accompanied, of course, by Matthew James, and by their dog, Bridget Fogarty, "named after still another Irish great-great-grandparent."

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